

American POWs: “We must never forget their sacrifices”

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column the week of March 7, 2022)

Here is Carolyn Krause’s second article in the two-part series on the stories Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee told and her concluding comments in her slide show recently presented virtually to the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge.

As the proverb goes, “it’s not what you know but who you know” that often leads to a desired job and successful career. In many cases, who you know can inspire and drive you to learn more to increase what you know about certain topics. That has been true of Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Sharon Lee, whose father was a prisoner of war (POW) in Germany during World War II.

When she talked about him, she learned that some of her lawyer and judge colleagues also had fathers who were POWs in the 1940s during the world’s most devastating war. She did considerable research (books, military websites, National Archives, interviews) to learn more about these POWs, the conditions they endured and their lives after returning to the United States as members of the Greatest Generation. And then she shared her knowledge and stories about a dozen POWs with multiple audiences in her slide-show presentation “American Heroes with Common Bonds.”

Jewish prisoners of war were often separated from and treated more harshly than other POWs by Germans during World War II, Justice Lee told her League of Women Voters audience. “They had to wear dog tags marked with the letter ‘H’ for Hebrew.”

Consider the experience of Pvt. David Goldin, a Jew from Richmond, Va., who, according to Justice Lee, “was a POW for the shortest time but got the worst treatment of the five POWs” whose stories she told. His son Arnold Goldin serves as a judge on the Tennessee Court of Appeals. Goldin, who died in 2002 at age 91, was drafted into the Army on Mar. 9, 1944.

“He left his wife and son and fought in the Battle of the Bulge starting on Dec. 16, 1944, one of the largest and bloodiest battles ever fought by the U.S. Army,” the justice said. “Americans were outnumbered and caught off guard by the Germans’ surprise attack.” But the Allies won the battle and the Germans lost 120,000 people and lots of military supplies.

“When the battle ended on Jan. 25, 1945, nearly 20,000 American soldiers had lost their lives,” the justice said. “Some 47,000 were wounded and more than 23,000 soldiers were captured or missing in action. Goldin was captured on Jan. 8, 1945. The next 104 days would be the worst days of his life.”

Because of the relentless Allied bombing of German jet fuel supplies, the Nazi leaders sought to create a secret, underground synthetic fuel production facility near Berga in eastern Germany. The plan was to get forced labor to bore tunnels that would lead to an underground chamber where the aviation fuel could be made.

“Hitler ordered thousands of concentration camp prisoners to bore the tunnels,” the justice said. “But they were so weak they could barely work.” So, in violation of Geneva Convention rules, a plan was conceived to force Jewish-American POWs to perform the difficult tasks of digging through the hills on the banks of the Elster River.

Goldin and 350 other POWs were rounded up, packed into boxcars and taken on a five-day journey to Stalag IX-B in Bad Orb, Germany. There Jewish-American POWs were segregated before being removed to a labor camp near Berga.

On Feb. 13, 1945, Goldin and other Jews were marched up a hill to the labor camp. Its four one-story, unheated barracks had triple-deck bunks infested with bed bugs, fleas, lice and vermin. The POWs, including troublemakers and unlucky prisoners, as well as Jewish Americans, were forced to work in the

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tunnels 12 hours each day with little food and rest. The work in mine shafts as deep as 150 feet exposed them to considerable dust but they had no protective gear. If they slowed down, they were beaten.

Goldin kept a diary on a small scrap of paper using a silver fountain pen he was given at his bar mitzvah. On Feb. 19, his fifth day in the mine, he wrote, “Had a serious accident. Got hit by a large rock falling from the ceiling on top of my head and was knocked unconscious.”

“He had a compound skull fracture and was unconscious for four days,” Justice Lee said. “He returned to work in the mine shaft nine days later without receiving medical attention.”

She said the American POWs were so desperately hungry that they stole food from the pockets of dead men. Goldin got some bread that he held securely in his pocket with his hand and then ate one small bite at a time.

Out of 350 men taken to Berga, 70 died in 69 days. Berga workers were required by Germans not to talk about the camp. POWs had to sign a security agreement that stated: “Some activities of American POWs within German prison camps must remain secret not only for the duration of the war but in peacetime as well.”

Asked why the Berga project was long kept a secret, Justice Lee said, “The Germans didn’t want Americans to know how bad U.S. soldiers were treated.”

On April 4, 1945, Germans began to evacuate the prison camp as the Allies advanced on them. Two days later, 295 remaining prisoners, including Goldin, started on a death march that would last 19 days; 50 POWs died during the march.

On April 23, 1945, Goldin and other POWs were liberated by American soldiers. He was taken to a U.S. Army hospital in Germany. He kept the silver fountain pen for years and then gave it to his grandson at his bar mitzvah.

Bruce Foster left a promising law practice in Knoxville to join the U.S. Army to serve his country. His son, Bruce Foster Jr., is a Knoxville attorney.

Foster was captain of the 106th Infantry for the 122nd Regiment. After a year of training, he was sent to England in October 1944. His regiment entered combat on Dec. 10, 1944, as it guarded the American line in Belgium. On Dec. 16, 1944, the day that the Battle of the Bulge started, German soldiers surrounded his unit. Foster and his fellow soldiers became POWs.

“They were marched into Germany without food in the bitter cold,” Justice Lee said. “They were loaded into crowded boxcars and carried deeper into Germany.”

On the night of Dec. 23, 1944, the boxcars were sitting idle in a Limburg railway yard when many of them were bombed by British airmen. But the boxcar Capt. Foster was in was spared.

He was then confined in a prison camp near Hammelburg. It so happened that General George Patton’s son-in-law, Lt. Col. John Waters, was held at that camp so the American military gave it special attention.

In March 1945, according to Justice Lee, Patton sent the 4th Armored Division to liberate the camp. “It was a poorly planned maneuver,” she added. “Patton denied ordering the move to free his son-in-law. A special unit opened the gate, asked for Waters, but had no way to transport all the prisoners out. Waters was shot in the raid and was in the prison hospital. The task force was ambushed and forced to surrender to the Germans.”

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Capt. Foster was able to escape but was apprehended a few days later and became a POW again. He was incarcerated for five more months and then liberated in May 1945. He returned to his law practice in Knoxville and served his clients for the next 43 years until his death in 1988.

From all her research, Justice Lee came to this conclusion: “Once liberated these American heroes returned home very different yet very much the same. They had physical problems caused by the war that stayed with them the rest of their lives. They had emotional and mental scarring that never left them. While prisoners in camps, they were all cold, hungry and homesick. In the dark, lonely hours of the night, they wondered if they would ever see their families again.

“They returned home, they raised families, and they were hard-working, productive members of their communities.

“What were the common bonds that helped them endure and survive the war? They never gave in or gave up. They were determined to be reunited with their families. They had an enormous love for their country and their families. During the war they had seen so much death and violence that after that experience, each day was a gift. Each day was a great day that had to be lived to the fullest. They were grateful to be alive.

“They were forgiving, they did not harbor grudges or resentment. They were optimistic. They did not complain or whine. They did not waste food. They instilled in their children respect for their country and a desire to serve. They were true American heroes.”

Justice Lee said that the experiences of the Greatest Generation offer lessons for Americans today as we face adversity on a lesser scale. “We should face each day with optimism and hope and a determination to succeed and we must never forget the sacrifices that all our veterans have made for our freedom and liberty.”

Thank you Carolyn. Readers be looking for an upcoming article by Carolyn that will feature Tennessee prison camps for German prisoners of war during World War II.



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Private David Goldin



Captain Bruce Foster